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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the implications of changes in the family environment on child development. Changes identified concern increases in the number and percentage of children who live in poverty, maternal employment in two-parent families, single-parent families, and the number of children in nonparental child care. Characteristics of poverty for children involve duration, race, one-parent families, and rural populations. Low income is associated with many negative outcomes for children, and income loss is an important contributor to problems experienced by mother-only families. The effects of these family variables are mediated and moderated by a range of child, family and environmental characteristics. Boys appear to be more vulnerable than girls to stressful events in the family. The age of the child is an important determinant of effects. Support systems in the extended family and community consistently emerge as important moderators of the negative effects of divorce, maternal employment, and nonparental care. A list of 24 references is included. (RJC)

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Consequences of Family Change for Children's Development

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The first paper in this symposium (Hernandez, 1989) identifies three important changes in the family environments of American children during the past 20 or 30 years. First, there has been a steady increase in the number and percentage of children who live in poverty. This trend appears using several definitions of poverty: the official U.S. Government poverty level (Congressional Budget Office, 1988), the poverty gap (the total dollar amount by which incomes of the poor fall below the poverty line) (Greenstein, 1988), or by the sensible definition used by Hernandez (1989). Second, there has been a decline in breadwinner/homemaker families reflecting two trends: increases in maternal employment in two-parent families and increases in single-parent families, most of which are mother-only families. Third, because mothers of young children are in the paid work force, more children require non-parental child care during infancy and early childhood.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the implications of these trends for children's development. First, I will discuss the nature of poverty for children in the 1970's and 1980's, using some of the data that I expect Greg Duncan and Saul Hoffman would have discussed if they had been able to be here. Then I will present some ideas about how we might understand the consequences of social trends for children's development. I should warn you now, however, that such ideas are more in the nature of proposals about how we might go about learning more rather than solid data-based information.

What Characterizes Poverty for Children?

Most of the statistical information about poverty and family income is cross-sectional. The trends over time represent changes in cross-sectional slices for different years. One gets a different type

of information from longitudinal or panel data. The most extensive and well-known investigation of this kind is the Panel Study on Income Dynamics described extensively by Duncan and his associates (Duncan, 1984; 1988). In a recent report on these data (Duncan, 1988), children who were 4 or younger in 1968 were analyzed for the subsequent 15 years. These longitudinal data make it clear that "poverty" is not a single or homogeneous condition. There are several types of poverty that may have different influences on children.

Poverty can be persistent and long-enduring or it can be relatively transitory. Many children lived in families that were poor at some time in 15 years (34%), but 11.8% were poor for 5 or more years. Although transitory poverty may well have serious consequences for children's development, persistent poverty probably has different and more serious consequences.

The single strongest correlate of persistent poverty is race. Only 19% (1 in 5) of all black children were in families that were never below the poverty line. For white children, 66% (about 2/3) were never poor by that definition. The average black child spent 5.5 years in poverty; the average white child spent slightly less than 1 year in poverty (Duncan, 1988).

Children living with one parent are at much greater risk for poverty than those with two parents, particularly when the single parent is a woman (about 90% of the single parent families). Therefore, the "effects" of poverty and single parent family structure are confounded (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986).

Poverty is not limited to urban slums. It is at least as high or higher in rural areas, particularly in the South, and especially if

you are black (Greenstein, 1988; Jensen, 1988). Much of the research on poverty and poverty policies is explicitly or implicitly based on an urban model. It is obvious that many conditions in rural areas are different from those in urban areas, and policies may need to be different as well. One example is suggested by a series of income maintainence experiments conducted in several parts of the country in the late 1960's and early 1970's. In these studies, experimental groups of families received a guaranteed minimum income while control groups did not receive income maintainence. Although the primary outcomes studied were adult work force participation, several of the investigations gathered data on health, education, and family variables. There were positive effects of income maintainence on family nutrition and school attendance for a rural sample in North Carolina, most of whom were black. There were no effects for a rural sample in Iowa, most of whom were white, probably because they were less severely deprived without the income intervention. Similarly, the effects were scattered and inconsistent in urban samples (Salkind & Haskins, 1982; The Rural Income Maintenance Experiment, 1976).

In short, poverty is diverse. Not all children living in poverty suffer the same types of deprivation. Families can live in chronic, persistent poverty or in relatively temporary poverty. Some of the family changes identified by Hernandez are both causes and outcomes of poverty, particularly single-parent families. And, of course, the need for non-parental care results directly from changes in the labor force participation of women. If we are to gain an understanding about the effects of economic deprivation, family structure, and child care on children, the models and variables investigated must take into account these variations.

Consequences for children's development

I will now attempt a brief summary of what we know about the effects of economic conditions, family structure, and child care on children's development. These topics lend themselves to the ecological framework proposed some years ago by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986) because they require inclusion of different levels of analysis. In that framework, socializing influences on children's development are analyzed at several levels: the interactions within the family, the institutions and groups outside the family with which the child has direct interactions (e.g. school, neighborhood), and the institutions that affect children indirectly as a result of their influences on parents' lives. This model helps to integrate psychological, sociological and economic analyses of children and families.

Poverty. Perhaps because child development is studied primarily by psychologists, we know much more about the effects of maternal employment, single-parent families, and child care on children than we do about the effects of economic deprivation and poverty. The correlates of poverty are well-known. From before birth, poor children are at risk for health problems manifested by high rates of infant mortality. They are also at risk for delayed intellectual development during infancy and the preschool years and for poor academic performance, school failure, and dropping out of school. For girls, adolescent pregnancy, often outside marriage, may accompany low education and low wages. As a result, they begin another generation of poverty.

Nevertheless, we know relatively little about what aspects of family income or poverty are critical for any of these developmental outcomes or what processes are involved. The work by Elder, Nguyen, and Caspi (1985) is a model for the kind of research that needs to be carried out. In these investigations, familiar to most of you, they traced the influences of family income loss on family functioning and parent-child relations. Their analyses indicated that paternal unemployment (and the resulting income loss) was associated with child behavior problems primarily as a function of paternal punitiveness and lack of nurturance. Their analyses suggested that low income alone was not the only critical variable; the effects on children were mediated largely by the fathers' psychological stress. The failure implied by the inability to get a job may have been as important as the economic deprivation. Mothers did not respond to family income loss with same pattern of punitiveness, though they, too, were suffering the effects of income loss. The effects of paternal job loss and income loss are well reviewed by Vonnie McLoyd (1989) in a recent issue of the American Psychologist.

Income loss may have different consequences than persistent poverty. McLoyd is currently exploring stresses of poverty in single parent, mother-only families using a model based on the hypothesis that parental stress may lead to conflictful parent-child interactions.

Family income also affects the types of non-family institutions with which children interact -- the schools, child care providers, neighborhood facilities, peers, and mass media to which they are exposed. Let me cite just two of many possible examples. In urban poor areas, the physical safety of children is problematic. As a

result, conscientious parents allow less independence than many suburban parents. One inner-city mother whom we interviewed recently laughed when we asked about outdoor play space for the children. She said, "We don't let our kids out; we keep them inside." In rural areas, children may be allowed out, but homes are isolated and physically inadequate.

Partly because there are few opportunities for recreation away from home, low income families watch more television than higher income groups (Huston, Watkins, & Kunkel, 1989). Low income urban black children are the only socioeconomic group who watch more television when their mothers are employed than when mothers are homemakers (Messaris & Hornik, 1983). Why? Because employed mothers insist that children stay indoors after school for safety reasons. Some of that television may be beneficial, at least for preschoolers, but much of it is violent, filled with stereotypes, and rife with advertising for toys that poor children cannot afford (Huston, et al., 1989).

Single parent families. In 1950's and 1960's, "father-absent" families were studied extensively because the most influential psychological theories of socialization, derived from psychoanalysis, emphasized the importance of the father for male role adoption by boys. Some theories also proposed a role for fathers in the sex role socialization of girls (Biller, 1971; Biller & Weiss, 1970). More recently, investigations of single-parent families have been carried out in an effort to determine the consequences of divorce for children. Where deleterious effects, such as behavior problems, school problems, and adjustment problems occurred in these studies,

they were generally more pronounced for boys than girls (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Further research has demonstrated that the effects of divorce depend on a host of other variables including the child's attributes, the parenting environment, and outside support systems (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989).

Garfinkel and McLanahan (1986) integrated another body of literature, largely collected by sociologists, on mother-only families. Children in such families are at risk for school failure, dropping out of school, adolescent pregnancy , and low earnings in adulthood. In part, these outcomes for children are a direct consequence of the low income that characterizes many mother-only families. For example, an analysis of several large surveys of adolescents demonstrated that those in mother-only families had higher rates of high school dropping-out, premarital birth and single motherhood, and teen birth than adolescents from 2-parent intact families (McLanahan, Astone, & Marks, 1988). Income accounted for some of the family structure differences, but not all. However, other variables associated with single parenting -- socialization practices and neighborhood characteristics, as measured in surveys -- did not account for much of the mother-only family difference, even with income controlled.

The psychological and sociological data are worlds apart. Psychological investigations often focus on middle class families. Divorce produces a marked drop in income that may have a profound impact on children, but it does not plunge them into poverty as conventionally defined. Sociologists include the whole range of social statuses, but the measures for many variables are often crude and unsatisfactory, particularly in areas of attitude and

psychological issues. This domain cries out for interdisciplinary study that could integrate these different levels of analysis.

Maternal employment. Children in both one- and two-parent families are apt to grow up with an employed mother in the 1990's. The effects of maternal employment were recently reviewed by Hoffman (1989). As is the case of divorce, there are few simple effects on children. Instead, Hoffman proposes an analysis of processes, pointing out that the effects of maternal employment on preschool children depend on a host of variables including parent attitudes, the number of hours the mother is employed, social support, and the child's gender.

Non-parental child care. There is considerable disagreement among scholars about whether non-parental care in infancy and early childhood has positive, negative, or no effects on children's social and cognitive development (Belsky & Rovine, 1988; Clarke-Stewart, 1989). There is some evidence that infant day care is associated with insecure attachments to parents, but the effects appear to depend heavily on the quality of non-parental care. For low income children, on the other hand, there is strong evidence that high quality infant day care has beneficial effects on cognitive development and later school performance (Ramey, Bryant, Campbell, Sparling, & Wasik, 1988). The major problem is availability of quality care. It is rare, and it is expensive. Even a middle income family may experience difficulty in finding and paying for good quality care. For instance, a graduate student couple whom I know must pay $450 a month (about 1/3 of their income) for high quality care for their two preschool children.

Summary and Conclusions.

The changes in the American family in the last part of the twentieth century have profound implications for the development of children. Although stressful events such as divorce can lead to resilience for some children, many of the family changes appear to place increasing numbers of children at risk for problems in cognitive growth, school performance, and social adjustment. The phenomena of increasing poverty, single-parent families, two-earner families, and non-parental child care are linked to one another, so it is sometimes difficult to disentangle their separate effects. Low income in and of itself is associated with many negative outcomes for children, and income loss is an important contributor to the problems experienced by mother-only families. But the effects of these family variables are not simple; they are mediated and moderated by a whole range of child, family, and environmental characteristics. A few of these emerge in several analyses. Boys appear to be more vulnerable than girls to stressful events in the family. The age of the child is an important determinant of effects. More interesting from a policy perspective is the fact that support systems in the extended family and the community consistently emerge as important moderators of the negative effects of divorce, maternal employment, and non-parental care.

We need new programs of research that explore the processes by which family conditions influence children's development. The models tested will be most useful if they avoid the trap of nostalgia for a somewhat mythical past in which children received full-time care from a 24-hour mother with no money problems. A better model is provided by Hetherington et al (1989) who have tried to examine the determinants of resilience and coping as well as developmental

problems associated with divorce. We need models that can identify structural and environmental variables that support families in these new modes, and which provide guidelines for policies to support children's healthy development.

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